

Article

Interview with Rachel Robinson

Read the transcript of an online interview with the wife of Major League Baseball pioneer Jackie Robinson.

Rachel Robinson, the wife of Major League Baseball pioneer Jackie Robinson, answered questions from students on February 11, 1998, during a live interview. Mrs. Robinson is also the founder of the Jackie Robinson Foundation, which provides educational and leadership opportunities for minority students nationwide.

Did you experience much in the way of racial discrimination growing up? Did Jackie? Had anything changed by the time he started to play ball?

I was born and raised in northern California. Racial discrimination was very subtle. For instance, if we went to the movies, as we entered the lobby, the usher would direct us upstairs to the balcony. We were being segregated almost without knowing it.

When I went south for the first time in 1947, I was shocked by the legal discrimination where I had to use a drinking fountain labeled "for Negroes only"; or where I had to use a Negro women's bathroom in the airport.

Jackie grew up in Pasadena, California, where discrimination was even more blatant and humiliating. For instance, he could not swim in the YMCA pool, except on a day for Negroes. So, Jack experienced discrimination in a much more powerful form.

How did you and Jackie Robinson first meet? What was your first impression of him?

I was a freshman at UCLA and he was a senior. He was Big Man on campus, because he was the first four-letter man at UCLA — that is, he starred in all four major sports. I was introduced to him by one of his teammates on the football team. I was extremely shy, but I was rather pleased to see that he was also shy in that encounter. However, my impression of him was that he had great self-confidence, and I was pleased to see that he was not arrogant. It's a trait I detest. He was extremely handsome, with a wonderful smile. And he was clearly comfortable and proud of being a black man.

In the 1940s I was very impressed by that fact. Not all of us could carry our racial identity with such pride.

Did Jackie Robinson experience discrimination in the army?

Oh, yes. In the 1940s the armed forces were segregated. The black soldiers did not have the same accommodations and facilities to use as the white soldiers.

Jack had applied for officers training school to become an officer, but the army initially refused to review his application. Joe Louis, the world championship boxer, happened to be in the same unit as Jack at Fort Riley, Kansas. Joe wrote Washington, D.C., protesting discrimination in the army, and succeeded in getting the army to allow Jack and others to go for officer training.

The sad part of this part of his life is that while we were at war overseas, Jack was at war at home on the army base.

Was there discrimination on the college teams he joined?

No, not at UCLA. However, they did play southern teams, and had to be conscious of the vicious tactics that teams would plan. Tactics like ganging up with unnecessary roughness on a black player. A tactic like that can be hidden in a football game, where there's always a form of "ganging up."

When Jackie started playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers, did you travel with him? How were you accepted by the other wives, players, and people you met?

When Jack began with the Dodgers in 1947 — by the way, I never called him Jackie. The name didn't have the intimacy that calling him by his given name had. Anyway, in those days wives were not permitted to travel with the team. The teams were saving money, and the men had roommates.

Typical of those days, in terms of women, we were given a "treat" by being allowed to travel with the team maybe once a year. Today, in contemporary times, wives get elaborate treatment. They not only travel but have suites, limos, etc. Do I sound jealous? The whole situation was different then. It was more like a plantation system.

Initially one or two wives attempted to make me feel more comfortable as we sat in a special section of the ballpark for wives. But I think that the tensions were as evident in the stands as they were on the field. I became particularly close to Joan Hodges, the wife of Gil Hodges, Betty Erskine, the wife of Carl Erskine, and Pee Wee Reese's wife, Dotty, as well as the wives of the black players — Roy Campanella and Don Newcombe.

How difficult was it for Jackie to honor his agreement to be silent for two years and not respond to negative behavior?

Jack made a pact with Branch Rickey, the general manager of the Dodgers, and a pioneer in his own right. He would not respond to provocation regardless of what it was, or how much it hurt.

He was physically and verbally abused, particularly when he was on the road, in certain cities. The taunts angered him, sometimes frightened him, but he turned away from them.

I think the lesson for us is: if you have an overriding goal, a big goal that you're trying to achieve, there are times when you must transcend the obstacles that are being put in your way. Rise above them. Jack wanted to integrate athletics. He could not afford to create an incident on the field that would interfere with reaching this goal.

There had been predictions (at that time) that if you integrated sports, there would be riots in the stands and on the field, and races could not play together. He had to demonstrate that this was incorrect. Jack did so at considerable personal sacrifice. He was a personality who would usually fight back in an instant if he sensed that he was being mistreated. But he knew that he had to turn the other cheek for a short period of time — two years. That was a very clear part of the pact. So, he could bide his time knowing that it would come to an end, and he could soon be himself.

How did you both react when the Brooklyn Dodgers offered Jackie the chance to play in the major leagues? What did your families think?

This offer came as a total surprise to both of us. We were very excited, but we didn't know what it really meant in the larger sense. At the time, Jack needed a job. He'd just gotten out of the army and we wanted to get married. So initially, we were just pleased that we could carry out our plans. Our families were extremely happy for us, and somehow knew that if Jack were given an opportunity, he could make the most of it.

How did Jackie feel when other African Americans entered Major League Baseball?

Jack always said that being the first to break the color barrier was important. But it didn't prove anything in the long run if there was not a second. In other words, he wanted to see the door opened for minorities. So, he was thrilled when Roy Campanella became the second African American in the National League and Larry Doby became the first African American to play baseball in the American League. It meant to us that real social change was occurring in that system.

What was the worst or scariest experience you faced while Jackie played Major League Baseball? What was the worst experience for your husband?

From time to time we received hate mail. And because it was necessary for Jack to continue to perform, and because taking those messages seriously meant I would live in fear, we ignored the mail. Then, one day, we received a letter stating that Jack would be shot from the stands in a particular city. That was scary. We turned the letter in to the team, and asked that some measures be taken to protect Jack. It was hard then to believe that one could be killed because of one's race.

And yet, we knew of the lynchings in the South, and we knew that the potential for violence always existed in

the North as well.

What was Jackie's experience playing in the Negro American League? How did it compare to playing in the National League?

Jack played for one year with the Kansas City Monarchs — the team that Satchel Paige made famous. He was impressed by the caliber of play, and the unique way that the Negro leaguers performed. He learned a great deal from them, and enjoyed the camaraderie.

What he hated about playing in the Negro Leagues was the way the players had to live — traveling through the South on buses, unable to stop at hotels, unable to enter restaurants, unable to use restrooms. He found it thoroughly humiliating.

The Negro Leagues were flourishing for a time, and it's ironic that Jack's being signed by the Dodgers signaled the demise of the Negro Leagues.

What was it, in your opinion, that gave Jackie so much courage?

I believe that he derived his sense of himself — his life mission, and the courage to carry it out — from his mother, Mallie Robinson. She was an extraordinary woman — courageous, determined, extremely religious, and self-reliant. She had been a sharecropper in Georgia. Her husband left her with five small children. So, she packed them up and took them to California, all alone.

Mallie managed to purchase a home for the family from her salary as a domestic worker. And she created an environment that was filled with positive values, as well as love. She was THE major influence in Jack's life.

A lot of people admired Jackie. Who was Jackie's hero?

In the early 1940s, Joe Louis, boxing's world heavyweight champion, was our hero. We felt that he didn't just fight in a ring, but he was battling the world on our behalf. He was fighting for respect, opportunity, and our place in America.

Later on Jack met Martin Luther King, Jr. in the 1950s and early 1960s, when the reverend began organizing for the civil rights movement in the South. What Jack admired most about Dr. King was his nonviolent protest, and his use of organization and strategies that drew on the human spirit, and his sense of being entitled to all that America promised.

Did you or your husband ever regret that he decided to play in what had been an all-white league?

Did Jackie ever feel like quitting?

No, we never regretted the decision. There were times when he felt like quitting, but he never expressed to me any intention to quit. He fought back by performing with excellence, and — as many sports writers said — he would answer the critics with his bat.

How did your three children feel about being part of such a famous family? Was it hard for your children growing up?

Only one of my children, Jackie, Jr., the firstborn — and obviously the one named for his father — suffered greatly. From a very early age, like at 2, he was being compared to his father by other people, and virtually being told that he could never be as great as his father. He lived under his shadow, and was pained by having to compete with this great man. It affected his work in school, his relationships with the family, and eventually led to serious encounters outside our home.

He enlisted in the army, fought in Vietnam, became a drug addict, and eventually went for rehabilitation. But he came to a tragic end despite his efforts to change. He was killed in an automobile accident in 1971, the year before his father died.

Sharon and David, the younger children, had to learn to share their father with the world. And sometimes that was difficult. But they have overcome the feelings, and are flourishing as adults, both giving back to society in their own way.

What was Jackie Robinson really like? Did he have a good personality?

I'm glad you asked that question, because most people only know his public persona: The tough guy always battling, very consumed with the struggles in America. But the family knew a different person. We knew a man very capable of great love and commitment. I always felt especially fortunate to be loved by him and to experience his great tenderness.

Even his vulnerability was more evident at home. He tended to be quiet and had great routines. He cherished the opportunity to gather the family together for dinner. Jack never drank or smoked, and felt that one respected the household by not using profane language at home — though I understand from his teammates that he could manage the language very well in the locker room.

He had a very strong sense of responsibility. Even in the post-baseball period, he worked very hard to get into the civil rights movement, and to work on behalf of others. He had an interesting statement to make about what life meant to him, which the Jackie Robinson Foundation now uses. It was: that a life is not important, except in its impact on the lives of others.

Are you a baseball fan now? Who is your favorite team?

Yes, I am a baseball fan. Not a rabid one. And my team will always be the Dodgers, despite their defection from Brooklyn. For me, affiliations tend to be lifetime.

How were you and Jackie involved in the civil rights movement? Did you ever meet Martin Luther King, Jr.?

When Dr. King was marching in Birmingham in 1963, Jack went south to participate with him. Thereafter, he was always available when Dr. King called. One of the things we knew from this experience was that Dr. King needed money for the movement. Jack and I established an outdoor jazz concert on our property to raise funds to be used as bail money for those who had been jailed for their actions. That was my particular involvement, and that concert is still being held on the last Sunday in June in Connecticut. I now raise funds for the scholarship program of the Jackie Robinson Foundation.

Jack served on the board of directors of the NAACP for eight years, and was one of the chief fundraisers. He joined the Rev. Jesse Jackson in Chicago when he established Breadbasket and the PUSH organization. Informally, Jack kept himself involved all over the country as new movements were started, and new leadership appeared. His activities proved to me, and I think to others, that an individual can make a difference.

What do you think was Jackie's proudest moment? What has been your proudest moment?

I think I would say there were many proud moments in his lifetime, beginning with the birth of his children. We had always wanted a family, had learned to cherish family life from our own childhood, and so each birth brought great joy.

In terms of his profession, being elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in the first year of his eligibility was a high point for him. He had not expected to win this honor because he had challenged the baseball writers often, and had antagonized some. And they were the ones who had to vote for him for this honor. So, this was a great thrill.

I consider myself to be one of those very fortunate people who have lived to see wonderful things happen. When my daughter Sharon graduated from Howard University and received her masters degree from Columbia University, I was tremendously proud and excited. When my son David went to Tanzania, Africa, and single-handedly established a rural development project in his village, I was in awe of his achievement, and thrilled to know that he was carrying on family traditions in a totally new area.

I've said what I feel about the importance of family, so I have to tell you that I have ten grandchildren, and one great-grandchild, and every time they have their small victories, my life is enriched.

I am the founder of the Jackie Robinson Foundation. We provide four-year scholarships, totaling \$20,000, and I'm happy to tell you that we have serviced over 500 young people. And we have a 92 percent graduation rate — which is the highest in the country for comparable programs.

I have had my own joys about myself; I was always very independent and strong as a child, but very shy. I have worked hard to conquer the shyness and to prepare myself to live as an independent person, and not just a woman living in her husband's shadow.

I went back to school after many years as a homemaker, got my masters degree in psychiatric nursing at New York University, and went to work in mental institutions. My husband was not very happy with my going to work, but fortunately we struggled with this issue of my being a separate person. Jack died at an early age, and though I was devastated by the loss, I have been able to carry on my own work.

What advice do you have for children today to continue what Jackie started in civil rights?

Last year was the 50th anniversary of Jack's breaking the color barrier. Among the many exciting things that happened was the amount of correspondence I received from children of all ages, from all parts of the country. What delighted me about the letters was that these children were curious about their history, concerned about the impact of the history on their lives today, and were thinking about what they should be doing to make this a better world.

I think at any age, one can look around in your own setting and in your own family and find ways to contribute to social change. When you see attitudes that hurt others, or limit their opportunities, you can say to yourself: what is my part in this? Can I be a catalyst for change in my school, on my block, in my church, wherever I am? The question is: do I have a responsibility for others? I would say yes because I passionately believe that we are linked as human beings. Our destinies are intertwined. And what is happening to me ultimately is having an impact on you. So, if someone is homeless, uneducated, without medical care, without support, I have to feel some responsibility for them, and do whatever I can think to do. We all need to stand up and be counted.

I appreciate your listening to me today. And I wish you the very best in all of your endeavors. I love children. And I count on you to take the place of those who have gone ahead of you.